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HIGH SCHOOL SPORTS: Back to School

Try out for a sports team -- you won't be sorry

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It's almost that time. You will have to get up early. You will have to sit in class.

But you know that it is only four more periods until you get to run around in gym class, or that it is just two more hours until you get to battle with your teammates in practice, or that tonight you are headed -- along with a ton of others -- to the big football game.

The St. Joe's football team works out on the athletic field.
Harry Scull JR. / NEWS FILE PHOTO

Athletics are a big part of school, no matter what grade. For many, sports might help the school day fly by, but the experiences at those practices and games can also provide an invaluable education all their own.

As you head back to school, here are 10 things to keep in mind:

1) To try out or not try out?

The short answer is: Definitely try out. As the saying goes, you never know unless you try.

High school sports will be the last time many of you will participate in organized sports. Just ask your parents, aunts and uncles or older brothers and sisters how much fun they had during their "glory days," and see if any of them passed up a tryout here or there.

Not making the team is no fun, but -- until you are a senior -- there's always next year.

Even if you don't make the team, there can be lessons learned just in the experience -- take it from a sportswriter who played some varsity sports but didn't make others.

And you know who also didn't make the team on his first try? A freshman basketball player named Michael Jordan.

2) Never too early, never too late

You're an eighth-grader who wants to make varsity? If your coach thinks it is a good idea, give it a shot. There is a special round of testing to go through, but it's worth it -- getting the varsity experience earlier than most, even if you don't end up making the team, can help not only on the field, but also in the maturation process.

Want to try out for something different as a senior? Go ahead. Trying out is always better than not, and this is your last shot.

3) One sport or two? Or three?

In middle school and junior varsity, there's no reason to not participate in different sports, soak up different experiences and see what sport you like best and which one you do well in (hopefully they're the same).

At the varsity level, plenty of athletes specialize in one sport, and sometimes that makes sense due to time commitments in leagues during other high school seasons. But there are also many top athletes who still compete in different sports. Recent Williamsville North graduate Corrin Genovese, who received a softball scholarship to Missouri, not only played basketball during the winter but also played field hockey as an underclassman and volleyball as a senior.

4) Want to make the team?

If you haven't worked out this summer, you'd better go run around the block a few times after reading this.

It seems that every year, offseason training and conditioning become even more important to high school sports. The championship teams almost always talk about how they spent summers and offseasons -- almost always with their teammates -- working their butts off in preparation for their season. It may be too late to get in gear for fall sports, but it's never too early if you have your eye on the winter.

5) Getting in the game

Making the team is the first step. Playing time can be, yes, a whole other ballgame.

You may have been the star of your youth league team, or even your travel team. However, especially if you are in a large school district, you may have to prove yourself all over again. Know that if there is a lot of talent on your team, only so many people can see the field. You might have to be patient by sitting behind upperclassmen at the start of the season, or perhaps the whole year. Just work your butt off to get on the field, and, if not, be prepared to step up if you get even the slightest chance. It's your job to make the coach's decisions tough.

6) Intramural option

There's certainly nothing wrong with not being involved in interscholastic sports -- but there's still a way to be part of a team. Maybe you're concentrating on other extracurriculars like music or art or various clubs, or you have an after-school job, or maybe organized sports are just not your thing.

Somewhere between gym class and the varsity are intramurals, where there's plenty of fun to be had. Competitions like co-ed volleyball tournaments can be a blast.

7) Show school spirit

If you're not on the field, that certainly doesn't mean you can't be into the game.

Western New York is full of top-notch athletic programs that are accompanied by great student sections, with the St. Joe's-Canisius rivalry probably topping them all. Those schools' matchups in any sport bring out fantastic crowds, with St. Joe's "rowdies" and Canisius' "Blue Crew" student sections not only in attendance, but equipped with detailed chants to rile the other team.

Strong student sections can be found at Clarence, Jamestown and Newfane -- just to name a few. A few years ago, students at Williamsville North organized their student section into the "Green Squall," complete with their own T-shirts.

It's an excellent way to show pride in your hometown and support for your fellow students -- and how much fun is it to be bouncing in the bleachers when your team is kicking a neighboring school's butt?

8) Be a good fan

When cheering on your team, be loud and proud. Just be sure that you (this goes triple for the students who lead the way for their sections) concentrate on being funny and witty and not outright demeaning to opposing players or fans. Athletes need to play the game the right way, and so do the fans.

9) Adult education

Kids, you know how your parents sit you down for talks? If you play sports, now it's your turn.

Have a chat with Mom and Dad and remind them to be positive when cheering, not to cheer the other team's mistakes and not to yell at the referee.

There is nothing that is more off-putting than parent or adult fans screaming from the sidelines, no matter what they're screaming about. High school sports can be an outstanding learning experience for all -- and nothing takes away from that more than an adult who has lost perspective.

10) Parents, respect the coach

Mom and Dad, you're the bosses at home. However, the teacher is the boss in the classroom, and the coach is boss on the field. Keep that in mind when you attend -- and you had better attend -- the very useful parent nights many athletic programs hold nowadays.

There are almost always valid reasons why the starting lineup looks like it does, or why some players get more playing time than others. It's part of the educational process that can prove so valuable.

No coach is perfect. However, whatever the issue, if you are going to speak to the coach directly, it had better be worth it. Otherwise, fighting battles on behalf of your children will not help. At the very least, your kids won't be learning the life lessons that come with sports. At worst, you are likely embarrassing your child.

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