

Team Sports May Seem Pointless in Essence but in Reality it is Vital, Especially for Kids

Shôn Ellerton, September 6, 2026

There's more to the bizarre and strange power of chasing a ball than meets the eye.



The absurdity of it all

I've never really been much into team sport and never could quite understand what all the fuss is about.

Watching groups of people kicking or grabbing balls of all shapes and sizes, although that statement could be taken out of context in entirely the wrong way!

Think about it.

There is something odd about watching two teams focus on one ball. The intent is to possess it and move it to the other side of the field, while the opposing team does everything it can to stop them and take control of it.

And then it just goes on and on and on and on.

Funnily enough, there's an old Soviet film from the 1950s called [*Old Khottabych*](#). It portrays a genie found by a boy who, when released, simply cannot understand why all the players are fighting over just one ball. To solve the problem, he hails down a shower of balls during the game so that every player can have his own.

Such a great story!

For short periods, given the right circumstances, I can enjoy watching an engaging game, whether it's Australian Rules football, rugby or basketball. There is no doubt that the impressive skill and boundless energy of these players is quite awe-inspiring.

A better day at the footy

Today, I took my son to watch a South Australian Rules footy game at state level (the SANFL) rather than national level (the AFL), at Adelaide Oval, a very nice venue that still retains its grassy section on the northern side.

It was quite a pleasurable experience.

It is a nice, big stadium with plenty of seats to choose from. It was perhaps a quarter full at best, and that's not including the very top sections, where no one sat. The ground lets people sit wherever they want. There were virtually no queues anywhere, either. I could grab a beer and some hot chips just like that, without waiting in an endless queue of sheep. Not only that, but during half-time my son was invited to join other kids in a mini 15-minute game, which he really enjoyed.

Because there weren't too many people, I could sit well away from everyone else and not be drowned out by the massive roar of incessant crowd cheering. I actually hate crowds and do my best to avoid them.

I'll go on.

Getting to and from the game was a dawdle because we could walk at a normal pace to the entrance without shuffling like cattle to the slaughterhouse. I could get through security with ease, without being made to feel like a convict carrying a bag full of weapons or, heaven forbid, alcohol, which they would rather extort you for at many times the cost after making you wait an eternity in yet another queue. You don't feel packed like sardines on the train, and you can avoid the drunken lout abusing everyone because his precious team has lost.

And best of all, the SANFL players were, in my opinion, every bit as damned good as the AFL ones. At least, that's my uneducated opinion.

What the AFL gives you instead

With the AFL, you get none of the above!

This is what you get instead:

No half-time fun with the kids.

Busy queues everywhere, whether you're getting in, buying food and drink or simply going to the toilet.

Assigned seating, so you aren't allowed to go wherever you like.

Heightened security to prevent you from entering members-only or other premium sections. In some sports, particularly soccer, they segregate fans to stop them from tearing each other apart.

Too much noise and too many people too close to me. I want enough space not to brush against other people.

Extremely expensive ticket prices.

And for what?

The play isn't any more enjoyable. So what's the big deal?

This applies to a variety of other sports. For example, I find watching college American football far more enjoyable than watching the professional game for the same general reasons. Again, the quality of play is every bit as good at college level.

So why the hell do so many sports enthusiasts pay so much more money and suffer the inconveniences of attending high-level, highly paid, highly political, overly sponsored and overly corporatised sporting events?

Are sports enthusiasts really sports enthusiasts?

I wonder whether many sports enthusiasts are not really sports enthusiasts in the technical sense. In other words, people who watch very good players display their skills while battling it out on the field. Perhaps they attend these highly expensive and oversubscribed games to be amid roaring, noisy crowds and to follow their tribal instinct over which team will win or lose. In an earlier piece, I discussed the poor manners of spectators who abandon the game when their own team starts to lose.

It's a funny thing about sport.

What is it that compels people to watch it incessantly? What compels them to talk about which team is winning, where it sits on the ladder and all that stuff? What actual difference does it make to their lives? I've come across conversations like this:

“Do you remember when Alberto scored three goals in a row back in 1996?”

OK. I shrug. So the hell what?

And this is another thing, seriously. While in Britain some years ago, I heard sports fans in a bar after a game complaining about the high cost of their train fares to the sports ground. Yet the instant you start talking about politics, they lose interest completely. Perhaps sporting events are a ruse by politicians to distract the general public from becoming too involved in politics!

Why children need sport

However, after all my ranting above, it must be said that sport is extremely important.

My son loves playing sport and loves watching it too. And that's the key. He's out there building a network of friends by playing club and school team sports, whether it's cricket, Australian Rules footy or soccer.

Although, having said that, I don't entirely understand soccer. Not being able to use your hands, except for the goalie, is such a bizarre concept to me. My son even quipped that, when soccer players are merely touched the wrong way, they fall to the ground, curl up into a ball, scream like babies and pretend they're about to die.

So true!

But without sport, I think many kids would be very much lost today, especially with so many hemmed up in the house, doing things online on their computers.

Although I wasn't into team sport as a kid, I had other interests such as urban exploration, mountain climbing, hiking and solo sports like judo and archery. Relatively few kids these days are into solo adventuring. I think there was possibly a higher percentage of kids back in the 1980s getting out there and mucking around in the urban environment. Like I once did.

Team sport is considered a form of structured play. It teaches fellowship, discipline and respect, and ultimately helps create new networks of friends. Those friendships then lead to unstructured play like climbing trees, playing laser tag, hanging out at the park or whatever else kids do together in a random sort of way. Unstructured play is very important, but without getting to know other kids, it's hard for them to have it in the first place. Especially for one-child families.

Initiating unstructured play with children is not always easy because children can be embarrassed when their parents introduce them to kids they don't know. They cling to you for a while, but once the children coalesce around something they have in common, the ice breaks. This is why it's easy when kids participate in structured play like sport.

It's also worth mentioning that adults benefit as well. For example, afterwork events like casual five-a-side soccer games or something else that may not be too physically challenging.

Ultimately, it brings people together.

When parents want it more than the children

But can sport go too far with kids?

My simple definition of when sport goes too far is when the parents want it more than their children do.

Of course, this applies to areas besides sport, but in sport it can become quite toxic.

I remember that, when I was at school in the United States, some of my friends were literally abused by their parents if they didn't perform well at sport. These were the sort of parents who would humiliate their own children during a game if they weren't performing.

This is pure ugliness and enough to put any child off sport. But I've seen it happen. Kids so afraid of disappointing their sports-loving parents that they would suffer through playing rather than be a disappointment.

Then those very same parents would spend oodles of cash on the sport their children had been strong-armed into playing. They would make their children

feel guilty if they didn't acquiesce to their parents' pet love of sport because of all the money spent on them.

I have never pushed my son to play sport. We have always been pleased that he chose to go down this path, but we also enjoy seeing him take pleasure in non-sporting activities such as music, art and drama. One could say that he is a natural at sport and has not been overly coerced into it.

It brings people together

Watching sport and playing team sport may not be things I personally enjoy very much, but sport does play a very important role in society today.

It brings people together.

I even remember a very haunting but beautiful episode from the history of the First World War when, during the [*Christmas Truce of 1914*](#), British and German soldiers exchanged gifts and played the odd game of football between the trenches, only to start killing each other again when the battles recommenced.

There have even been football games between North Korea and South Korea, two worlds that are so far apart ideologically.

Sport may seem pointless at times. At least, in my opinion. But it is important, especially in today's reclusive, virtual and online age.