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It's Not Just a Game!

whether you run a race, bounce a basketball, or hurl a baseball home, you do it because it's fun. Some scientists claim play is a natural instinct — just like sleep. That might explain why sports are likely to be as old as humanity.

Some claim sports began as a form of survival. Prehistoric man ran, jumped, and climbed for his life. Hunters separated themselves by skill, and competition flourished. Wall paintings dating from 1850 B.C., that depict wrestling, dancing, and acrobatics, were discovered in an Egyptian tomb at Bani Hasan. The Ancient Greeks revolutionized sports by holding the world's first Olympic games at Olympia in 776 B.C. But it wasn't until the early nineteenth century, that sports as we know them came into play. (Pardon the pun!) Modern sports such as cricket, golf, and horse racing began in England and spread to the United States, Western Europe, and the rest of the world. These sports were the models for the games we play today, including baseball and football.

All organized sports, from swimming to ice hockey, are considered serious play. There are rules to obey, skills and positions to learn, and strategies to carry out. But Peter Smith, a psychology professor at Goldsmiths, University of London, and author of *Understanding Children's Worlds: Children and Play* (Wiley, 2009), says, "Sport-like play is usually enjoyable, and done for its own sake."

Different Sports for Different Folks

Sports come in many shapes and sizes. Both team and individual sports have advantages and disadvantages, but most people find that from an early age, they are drawn toward one or the other. In a team sport like soccer, you're part of a group, striving to be a winning team. That means putting the team ahead of your own accomplishments. You must learn to get along with your teammates and share responsibility. In an individual sport like tennis, you're usually only concerned about your own performance. That can make these sports more challenging.

The Ultimate Value of Sports

Whether it's football or golf, there's little doubt about the value of sports. According to the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP), "play is essential to the cognitive, physical, social, and emotional well-being of children and youth." Play not only exercises our bodies, it also exercises our minds. Sports teach us about ourselves and our world. We learn how to negotiate plans, settle disagreements, and how to monitor our attitude. The skills we learn playing can be applied to school and work. Since organized sports are a hands-on, minds-on learning process, they stimulate our imagination, curiosity,

and creativity. The growing science of play is armed with research claims that play, and thus sports, is important to healthy brain development. We use language during play to solve problems, we use thinking when we follow directions to a game, and we use math skills to recognize averages and odds of each sports play.

Sports also raise our energy level and act as antidepressants. Activity increases the brain's level of chemicals called endorphins, which boost mood. When we start moving and having fun, we feel good about ourselves.

Forgetting the Fun

In a perfect world, everyone would have fun playing sports. But that's not always the case. Sports can get aggressive and cause scrapes, bruises, and broken bones. They can also hurt us psychologically. David Elkind, professor emeritus of Child Development at Tufts University and author of *The Power of Play*, says that when young children play self-initiated games such as tag or hide and seek, "misunderstandings and hurt feelings are part of the learning process, and happen in a context of mutual respect. Those that arise in organized team sports, don't have the same supportive network, the sense of competition outweighs the sense of cooperation, and can be hurtful to the child's sense of self and self-esteem." Playing sports is usually fun, but sometimes we can get frustrated. It might be because of the pressure to win, parents who yell and scream from the stands, or coaches who treat us unfairly. Sports are supposed to bring people together, but they can also drive people apart. When sports are separated into skill level, gender, or ethnicity, some players feel isolated, begin to forget the fun in sports, and even want to quit. Sports may not always be a positive experience, but even when they're not, they give us a dose of how to face life's challenges.

Making Sports Work for Us

playing sports doesn't mean you have to play on a varsity team. And very few people have what it takes to be a professional athlete. But your school basketball coach or gymnastics teacher has found a way to make play their work. And in doing so, they've found the work best suited to who they are. According to Elkind, "Whenever we combine play with work, as in our hobbies, cooking, gardening, sewing, and carpentry, it is the full utilization and integration of all our interests, talents, and abilities. It's an activity that makes us feel whole."

Play is so important to our development that the United Nations High Commission for Human Rights has included it as a right of every child. In other words, it's your birthright to play! And there's no better place to play and learn about the world than on a sports field. So regardless of your sport — from swimming to soccer — play to have fun and you'll automatically win!

Keep Your Eye on the Ball

Are your eyes glued to the TV when LeBron James takes the court or Derek Jeter steps to the plate? While fans fill arenas, even more click their TVs on at home to watch athletes slam a puck into a net or hit a ball with a fat stick. Play is not only something to do, it's something to watch others do.

Sports are a form of entertainment. The joy you and your teammates! get by working together is the

same joy your family, friends, and other spectators get when they watch. Fans experience the thrill of victory and the agony of defeat, just like the players on the field. Think of all the applauding, shouting, and yelling that happen at sporting events. It's a way for many of us to live vicariously through the players' actions.

Sports are also social events, opportunities for strangers to cheer together and debate outcomes. A Saturday morning game is a great way to spend time with family.

Sports involve learning, too. Fans research players, teams, and the sports themselves. How many fans do you know who are walking encyclopedias of sports trivia?

Why do so many of us watch sports and have a favorite team? Studies show that it fills both emotional and psychological needs. We feel self-confident and experience joy when our favorite team wins. Sports fulfill our human need to belong, and many fans, whether their team wins or loses, enjoy the suspense that allows them to release their emotions. Where we live, our family background, peer pressure, and our own sense of self (identity) all determine which baseball cap we wear and why we root for our team.

So the next time you put your Red Sox cap on and tune in to the game, remember it's not just about the amazing pitchers and batters, but about the way you feel when you watch your team play. L.C.

PHOTO (COLOR): Baseball — From the 1830s to the late 1850s, Americans played a variety of ball and bat games. The first recorded baseball game took place in 1846 in Hoboken, New Jersey.

PHOTO (COLOR): Football — Derived from rugby, a game played at public schools in England, football began to develop in Canada and the United States in the mid-1800s. The first game of American intercollegiate football, most resembling today's game, was played between Tufts University and Harvard on June 4, 1875, at Jarvis Field in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Tufts won, 1-0.

PHOTO (COLOR): Basketball — In 1891, physical education instructor Dr. James Naismith invented the game of basketball in Springfield, Massachusetts. Designed as a sport to be played indoors during cold New England winters, basketball was originally played with a soccer ball and two peach baskets. In 1901, openended hoops replaced the game's closed baskets and basketball's "thirteen original rules" were created.

PHOTO (COLOR)

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